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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000439

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SUBJECT: MEETING WITH DEFENSE SECRETARY ON KARUNA PROBLEMS  
AND FORCED RESETTLEMENT

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Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Ambassador, EU Head of Mission Wilson and UNHCR Head Awad met on March 16 with Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa and Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights Mahinda Samarasinghe. Wilson shared with Rajapaksa a list developed by the EC Humanitarian Office of concrete examples of how Karuna and his cadres are disrupting humanitarian relief efforts in the east. Rajapaksa responded that the government was encouraging the Karuna group to lay down their arms and enter into politics in the east. He emphasized that the government's policy of not allowing paramilitaries to operate was already in effect in areas liberated from the LTTE such as Trincomalee. He estimated GSL army and police would reassert control over law enforcement in Batticaloa within two weeks. Awad briefed Rajapaksa and Samarasinghe that there were now 152,000 IDPs in Batticaloa, an increase of 70,000 in a two week period. He informed Rajapaksa that the GSL resettlement operations of March 15th had broken minimum international standards because some families had been put into buses while their children were still in school, thereby separating families. Many were resettled against their will. The operation had also not been coordinated with the UNHCR. Rajapaksa defended his decision to move IDPs from Batticaloa to Vakarai and Trincomalee as necessary to prevent overcrowding in the Batticaloa camps. He said reports of IDPs resisting resettlement were exaggerated because the IDPs had been threatened by the LTTE not to agree to return. Other independent sources such as a journalist who just returned from Vakarai, disputed Rajapaksa's statement, reporting that many IDPs had been forcibly resettled. Post recommends U/S Burns and the Secretary reinforce the importance of the GSL working with

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UNHCR and not forcibly resettling IDPs when they meet with Foreign Minister Bogollogama on March 16. End Summary.

Rein in Karuna

12. (C) Wilson shared with Rajapaksa a list of specific instances in which the Karuna Group had disrupted NGO operations in Eastern Sri Lanka. The list was developed by the EC Humanitarian Office specifically to demonstrate concrete examples of how Karuna and his cadres are disrupting humanitarian relief efforts in the east. The incidents ranged from threats and pressure on NGOs to procure from Karuna-linked suppliers, to forcible removal of equipment and supplies by Karuna cadres from INGO offices and warehouses, to requests for deviation of humanitarian services to Karuna cadres. Wilson emphasized that the list was not comprehensive, but nonetheless illustrated specific instances where Karuna cadres had disrupted ongoing humanitarian efforts.

13. (C) Rajapaksa responded that the government was encouraging the Karuna group to lay down their arms and enter into politics in the east. He emphasized that the government's policy is to liberate all parts of the east from the LTTE and then not let any armed groups -- be they LTTE, Karuna or others -- to operate in those liberated areas. He said that policy was already in effect in areas such as Trincomalee and Vakarai but he acknowledged that the government still had not evicted the LTTE from the Batticaloa area. Until the government was able to do so, the Karuna cadres argue they cannot give up their arms because of the need to defend themselves against possible LTTE attacks. Rajapaksa estimated that the government would be able to bring Batticaloa under its exclusive control within two weeks after which GSL army and police would reassert control over law enforcement.

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14. (C) Awad pointed out the potential difficulty the government might face in demobilizing armed Karuna forces and reintegrating them as a political force. Samarasinghe responded that the International Labor Organization had initiated a project specifically on reintegration of paramilitaries. Rajapaksa added that the government was thinking through the possibility of putting some Karuna cadres into the regular Sri Lankan Army.

Forced Resettlement of IDPs From Batticaloa

15. (C) Awad briefed Rajapaksa and Samarasinghe that there were now 152,000 IDPs in Batticaloa, an increase of 70,000 in the two week period. He expressed his deep concern that military forces in the east had forcibly resettled some IDPs from Batticaloa on March 15 (NOTE: In a brief aside with the Ambassador before the meeting, Awad said that approximately 4,000 IDPs had been sent to Vakarai on March 15th, some of them against their will. He did not provide these figures to Rajapaksa.) Awad explained to Rajapaksa that the UNHCR had responded to the government's call to create an IDP transition center in Trincomalee to which IDPs could be brought on an interim basis before returning to their villages, but he stressed the importance of moving all IDPs in an organized manner in accordance with international standards. He informed Rajapaksa that the operations of March 15th had broken minimum international standards because some families had been put into buses while their children were still in school, thereby separating families. The operation had also not been coordinated with the UNHCR.

16. (C) Rajapaksa defended his decision to move IDPs from Batticaloa to Vakarai and Trincomalee. Raising his voice, he said the UNHCR and other agencies had not done a good job of

resettling the IDPs in Batticaloa, thereby contributing to severe overcrowding when the latest influx of refugees from Thopigala arrived. Rajapaksa pointed out that Trincomalee was prepared to accept these IDPs and that the government agent of Trincomalee is a very capable administrator. Awad pushed back, noting that it was essential for the government to work with the UNHCR to ensure an orderly process in which families were not forcibly returned or separated from their children. Rajapaksa shot back that UNHCR could not move fast enough to meet the urgent circumstances in Batticaloa. Rajapaksa further pointed out that the IDPs who resisted resettlement had been threatened by the LTTE, but in fact welcomed the opportunity to return to their villages. He again reiterated that it was logical for the government to reduce growing in Batticaloa by sending some IDPs to Trincomalee in preparation for onward resettlement to Muttur. Ambassador and Wilson defended UNHCR and pointed out that the UN would be launching yet another emergency appeal to donors on March 22nd and that the donors would insist that GSL resettlement efforts be coordinated with the UNHCR and that the GSL avoid forcible resettlement and separation of families as the Foreign Minister and other senior GSL officials had repeatedly pledged to respect.

#### Comment and Action Request

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17. (C) It is clear that at least a portion of those resettled in recent days in Vakaraai were sent back against their will, despite repeated pledges from senior GSL officials that this would not be done. An independent journalist who just returned from Vakaraai confirmed to us that many of the resettled IDPs they had spoken to had confirmed that the army returned them against their will. These IDPs remain very concerned that the area is not as safe

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as the GSL maintains. Post recommends that U/S Burns and the Secretary reinforce the importance of the GSL working with

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UNHCR and not forcibly resettling IDPs, when they meet with Foreign Minister Bogollogama on March 16.

BLAKE